

HERA  
LINDSAY BIRD

**CINDY**  
**SHERMAN**

Untitled 404

## Untitled 404

I have called this poem Untitled 404, because that is the name of the photo  
I have chosen to talk about  
But I have less to say about this photo than this photo has to say  
about itself  
To describe art in public is a great personal dumbassery  
The best response to this poem would be to pick up a bottle of gin on  
the way home

I like this picture because it reminds me of loneliness  
And the great, unspecific boredom of life  
It's the expression I get every time someone tries to hold me accountable  
for my artistic wrongdoings  
The critical theorists advancing, with black leather pompoms

Recently someone scolded me for speaking about Cindy Sherman because  
Cindy Sherman was an instrument of the patriarchy  
Like an evil saxophone that only plays hold music for a bank  
Bad financial jazz pouring out of the telephone  
Oh sometimes I get so tired I want to blow the stars out, one by one

Every year people demand to know what art is feminist and what art  
is unfeminist  
Sometimes I wonder if it's ethical to be a woman at all  
It's a great aesthetic stupidity to waste your life on right-seeming behaviour  
Like putting a coin in a jukebox that only plays whale song

Once there was a time in which I too had many ideologies  
Many self-pleasing ideologies, with which to chastise others  
The theme of these ideologies was: however wrong you are, that is the  
exact amount I am right by  
I felt them in my blood like too much money

Once upon a time, I had many ideologies  
Many superior ideologies with which to cheerfully educate my family  
and friends  
Forget crying myself to sleep, I wanted to cry everyone else there  
Then drive off in my Cadillac, my blond wig blowing

Once upon a time I had many ideologies  
And by ideologies I mean specific ideas about things that other people should  
and shouldn't do  
But proving yourself right is a bad career  
Then you have to prove yourself even righter, in a blue satin pantsuit

Sometimes the world is so backwards all you can do is stare  
Stare and stare, from out behind your waterproof mascara  
Oh it's a great responsibility to be your own misogynist  
There are so many beaded handbags with which to oppress yourself

I do not think the great project of art is ideological messaging time  
Like Monet, spelling 'Fuck you' in waterlilies  
The great project of art is to pour your eyes into the world  
The sunset blazing overhead like too much eyeshadow

Untitled 404 is like a stock photo for loneliness  
Or a pin-up girl for Great Forgotten Blouses of the Midwest  
You stare out past the camera, into the great abyss of Western democracy  
And the great abyss of Western democracy stares back

There are a lot of punishments in this world  
And some of these punishments look a lot like day to day life  
Some things cannot be transformed, only endured  
You unbutton your blouse, like a Ukrainian tap-dance instructor in exile

People are always on the lookout for new ideologies with which to  
punish themselves  
Contemporary ideologies, studded with hashtags  
It's like not being able to wear a sexy nurse outfit unless you apply for  
a sexy medical licence  
You have to take someone's blood pressure with your skirt hiked up

Untitled 404 is the moment between weeping and preweeping  
Your eyes get hotter and hotter, like a faulty laptop charger  
It's a mundane aesthetic, like changing the font on your family  
newsletter  
Tossing up between Times New Roman, and Times Even Newer Roman

I will never be a good critic because I love too much what is ugly  
with the world  
The moon shining over all of us, with its soft white handrail  
It's like hanging a mirror on the side of your death to make your life  
look bigger  
Or the wet, black cellulite of the ocean

Untitled 404 is a secondhand nostalgia  
You think back to your childhood, but the past has been cordoned off  
You start to wonder about the future and the great untitled project  
of your life  
It keeps you up at night, like a big fluorescent sadness

The imperative to be correct is the great failure of the Left  
Sometimes you just want to wash iceberg lettuce in quiet despair  
It's like buying a second wig, and putting it on over the wig you're  
already wearing  
You cry and cry, impressing no one

Hera Lindsay Bird was invited by City Gallery Wellington to contribute to an event called 'My Favourite Cindy' on 19 November 2016, the opening day of *Cindy Sherman*. Asked to respond to her favourite work in the exhibition, she wrote the poem 'Untitled 404' and read it in the gallery alongside Cindy Sherman's photograph, *Untitled #404*.

**Cindy Sherman** is an American artist. For four decades she has explored female types and tropes, playing out a range of characters in staged photographs.

**Hera Lindsay Bird** is a New Zealand poet. Her first book, *Hera Lindsay Bird*, published in 2016 by Victoria University Press, has been widely celebrated and was reprinted the day after it was released.

IMAGE Cindy Sherman *Untitled #404* 2000. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. © The artist.

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# SHERMAN CINDY

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